USDA United States Department of Agriculture | Forest Service | Palouse Ranger District | 1700 Highway 6
Potlatch, Idaho 83855
208/875-1131
Fax: 208/875-1133

File Code: 1950
Date: October 29, 2010

Dear Interested Party:

The Palouse Ranger District of the Clearwater National Forest is initiating the environmental analysis of the Upper Basin project located within the Upper Elk Creek watershed that drains into the Dworshak Reservoir (see attached vicinity map). Upper Basin is the upper portion of the Robo Elk analysis area (north of the Shite Creek/ Johnson Creek divide) that was not analyzed for vegetation activities under the Robo Elk analysis. Since most of the proposed watershed improvement and most recreation activities have already been analyzed under Robo Elk, the Upper Basin project emphasizes proposed timber harvest, some road decommissioning, and a non-motorized trail proposal. The town of Elk River is located five miles south of the project area. Elk River uses a surface intake system to divert water from Elk Creek for their municipal water supply.

Why Here and Why Now?

Due to past management activities, fire exclusion, and an infestation of white pine blister rust, the current vegetation is fairly homogeneous, dominated by 60-90 year-old grand fir. White pine and other early seral tree species currently make up less than 3% of the total composition, compared to historical conditions when white pine occupied up to 33% of the landscape. Field surveys show the grand fir beginning to show signs of spreading root disease and other pathogens. Active Forest Management, including the planting of blister rust resistant white pine seedlings, will allow for a change in this condition, moving towards a more diverse and resilient vegetative community, while also providing a timber product for local communities.

Management Direction

The analysis area encompasses approximately 10,130 acres, which includes 760 acres of privately owned lands[1] that are mostly managed by Potlatch Corporation.

The National Forest portion of the analysis area is primarily Management Area E1, timber producing lands. Also present are Management Area A4, which consists of a half-mile visual corridor along Forest Road 382, and Management Area M2, which consists of riparian areas within at least 100 feet of perennial streams. The Forest Plan was amended in 1995, following a joint decision commonly called INFISH, which defined riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCAs) as those areas within 300 feet of fish bearing streams, 150 feet of non-fish bearing streams, 50 feet of intermittent streams and wetlands, and 150 feet from the edge of wetlands larger than one acre. These areas, managed as M2, usually occupy 25-30% of the landscape. Management direction for each area can be found in the Clearwater National Forest Plan. The following table briefly summarizes the distribution and direction of each management area:

[1] The other ownership is included for effects analysis purposes only. This project proposes no activities on these lands.

Management Areas	Acres	Direction
A4	1,550 (17%)	**Visual Travel Corridor** – Manage to maintain and enhance an aesthetically pleasing natural appearing forest setting surrounding the roads, trails, and areas of concentrated public use.
E1	5,480 (58%)	**Timber Producing Lands** – Manage to provide optimum, sustained production of wood products and viable elk populations while providing adequate protection of soil and water quality (Clearwater Forest Plan, page. III-57).
M2	2,340 (25%)	**Riparian Areas** – Manage under the principles of multiple use as areas of special consideration, distinctive values, and integrated with adjacent management areas to the extent that water and other riparian dependent resources are protected (Clearwater Forest Plan, page. III-69).

Purpose and Need

1. Vegetation

Purpose: Start the trend to restore white pine and other seral tree species to improve species diversity and balance vegetative successional stages across the landscape to create stand conditions that are resilient and allow for rapid recovery after disturbances.

Need: There is a need to restore white pine and other seral tree species in order to make these stands more resilient to change agents, such as insects and disease. Past events of the early 1900s (i.e. large scale industrial timber harvest, white pine blister rust, and to some extent fire suppression) greatly reduced the presence of western white pine and other seral species. With these tree species greatly reduced, the stands reforested naturally to higher percentages of grand fir and Douglas-fir, which are less resilient to disturbance agents, in particular, insects and diseases.

Past events also created a disproportionately large age class of trees that regenerated after disturbance. These approximately 60-90 year old stands are overstocked, where high tree density is responsible for poor health and low growth vigor. This overstocking along with the large presence of grand fir and Douglas-fir, further enhances the loss of resiliency to insect and disease pathogens. If allowed to continue, these conditions will likely lead to a decline in forest health and put future ecological, societal, and economical values at risk.

Also, strategically-placed treatment units can reduce potential fire risk and help protect the municipal watershed because treatments can change the probability of fire movement by increasing the relative frequency of milder, less intense fire behavior.

2. Watershed Improvement

Purpose: Protect and preserve the water quality of Elk Creek by reducing sediment and the risk of pollutants being delivered to the Elk River municipal water intake. Actions should also enhance other resource values (i.e. fish habitat and channel integrity.)

Need: The erosion of roads due to natural events, heavy traffic, and/or unauthorized use adds sediment to area streams, affecting water quality and local fisheries. There is a need to identify road candidates for decommissioning and/or intermittent storage.

3. Recreation

Purpose: Provide for additional non-motorized recreation opportunities within the project area.

Need: The Elk River area experiences extensive recreational use, with a large proportion concentrated in motorized use. Although present, non-motorized opportunities are limited in the Upper Basin area as well as on the Palouse Ranger District as a whole. The landscape, existing infrastructure and features available within this project area provide the ability to create additional opportunities and meet the needs of those recreationists seeking non-motorized activities.

4. Goods and Services

Purpose: Manage the landscape to provide for goods and services.

Need: There are needs to contribute timber products to the economy, maintain the municipal watershed for the town of Elk River, and provide public recreational opportunities. The Upper Elk Creek Basin area is important to local communities and can provide benefits to help meet regional and national interests.

Proposed Actions (see attached map)

1. Vegetation

- White pine restoration on approximately 410 acres.
  - Apply hazard reduction and site preparation activities following harvest activities (broadcast, jackpot, or underburning, or mechanical or hand piling followed by pile burning).
  - Plant early seral species.
- Commercial thinning on approximately 70 acres.
  - Apply fuel treatments following commercial thinning (jackpot burning or mechanical treatments).
- Approximately 0.4 mile of new specified road would be needed for logging access. Also needed are an estimated 0.7 mile of temporary road and the reconstruction of 6.0 miles of existing roads.
- Opportunities for up to 310 acres of precommercial thinning.

2. Watershed Improvement

- Decommission 2.3 miles of system roads. **Note:** These roads would provide logging access for this project and would be decommissioned after use.
- Place 2.4 miles of existing roads into intermittent storage following use for logging.

3. Recreation

Develop a non-motorized interpretive trail using an abandoned railroad grade to access a historic railroad trestle. The approximate 3-mile trail would be constructed on the existing railroad grade, requiring minimal clearing and soil disturbance. Any slash created during construction would be treated to reduce fuel hazards. The proposed trail would be constructed to follow the following trail design parameters:

- Tread width: 18" – 48"
- Design surface: Generally native with some imported materials
- Design grade: <12%
- Design cross slope: 5 – 10%
- Design clearing width: 12" – 18" outside of tread edge
- Design clearing height: 8'

Issues

Preliminary issues identified by the interdisciplinary team include:

Air Quality: This issue relates to smoke emissions produced during prescribed fire activities. All alternatives to be considered will adhere to the Clean Air Act and implementation would occur according to the procedures outlined in the North Idaho Smoke Management Memorandum of Agreement.

Economic Feasibility: There are two parts to this issue: (1) Providing for a cost efficient timber sale offering; and (2) providing funding to complete post-sale activities.

Fish Habitat: Habitat for brook trout could be adversely affected by increases in sediment, temperature, and decreases of large woody material. Design of timber and fuel activities would use INFISH guidelines to minimize adverse impacts.

Heritage Resources: Archaeological sites are evident throughout the analysis area that could be affected by proposed activities. Heritage surveys will be conducted in the area to identify any significant heritage resources, cultural, archaeological or historical sites. Potential direct and indirect effects to any such sites will be assessed and considered during project planning, plus, the Forest Archaeologist will consult with the Nez Perce Tribe and Idaho State Historic Preservation Offices regarding the project.

Old Growth Habitat: Current Forest direction is to not regenerate stands of old growth or stands within 20 years of meeting old growth criteria. No activities are proposed in these areas.

Size of Openings: Proposed regeneration harvest Units 3, 4 and 5 are each over 40 acres in size. In addition, proposed regeneration harvest Units 11, 23, and 24 are all adjacent to an existing plantation that would create an opening greater than 40 acres. A 60-day public review period will be initiated with the release of this letter. Approval to exceed 40 acres will be sought from the Regional Office and documented in the Decision Notice.

Soil Productivity: Use of machinery for logging and fuel reduction can cause additional compaction, soil displacement, soil mixing and loss of vegetation. Actions would be designed to keep detrimental soil disturbance below the 15% regional standard, or where soil disturbance already exceeds that level would identify restoration actions to be taken to improve soil

productivity.

Spread of Noxious Weeds: Logging, road and landing construction/reconstruction, and heavy vehicle traffic have the potential to further spread existing weeds and/or introduce new species of weeds. Mitigation measures and contract provisions would be included with each action alternative to minimize the spread of existing weeds and the introduction of new ones.

TES and MIS Species: The analysis area provides suitable habitats for a number of threatened and sensitive wildlife and plants species. The Endangered Species Act requires federal agencies to ensure their actions do not jeopardize the continued existence of listed species or adversely affect their critical habitats. In FSM 2670.22, management direction for sensitive species is in part, to ensure that species do not become threatened or endangered because of Forest Service actions. Forest Service policy guides habitat management for sensitive species and requires that concerns for sensitive species be considered during planning process. The potential effects of the proposed project will be evaluated in detail for all threatened and sensitive species potentially affected by the proposed action. A Biological Assessment and a Biological Evaluation will be prepared and the appropriate level of consultation will be conducted with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Sixteen fish and wildlife species were selected in the Clearwater National Forest Plan as management indicator species (MIS), which are designated as surrogates for other species to assess the effects of management activities. By maintaining viable populations of MIS, the viability of populations of all wildlife species should be ensured. The effects of the proposed project on selected MIS will be evaluated.

Trail 747: The western end of this trail, formerly National Forest System Road 3204, could provide logging access for Unit 3. Options include: (1) converting this 0.1 mile section of trail to road to accommodate log haul; or (2) the logs could be forwarded over this portion of trail (not requiring conversion to road). With either option, the trail would be restored to its original condition following use.

Tribal Treaty Rights: The Nez Perce Tribe has specific treaty reserved rights that result in activities that take place on what is now federal land, including the Clearwater National Forest. Article 3 of the 1855 Treaty with the Nez Perce Tribe states: "the exclusive right of taking fish in all the streams where running through or bordering said reservation is further secured to said Indians; as also the right of taking fish at all usual and accustomed places in common with citizens of the Territory; and of erecting temporary buildings for curing, together with the privilege of hunting, gathering roots and berries, and pasturing their horses and cattle upon open and unclaimed land."

Consultation with the Nez Perce Tribe will continue with this project analysis. Recommendations from the Tribe will be considered in development of the proposed action. Nez Perce fishing, hunting, and gathering rights will be protected.

Visual Quality: Since the Elk River area is a heavily used recreation destination, maintaining a natural appearing forest landscape will be an important consideration for this project. The Forest Plan visual quality objective (VQO) for this area includes partial retention in the foreground of the Road 382 visual corridor and modification in the middleground. The same VQO also applies to Trail 730.

Water Quality: Elk Creek is the source for Elk River's municipal water supply. Activities that introduce sediment, bacteria, and hydrocarbons into the stream could adversely affect the water treatment system or drinking water quality. The Idaho DEQ 2008 Integrated Report found Elk Creek and its tributaries in the Upper Basin project area supported beneficial uses. This project will be designed to minimize the probability that water quality in Elk Creek or its tributaries will be negatively affected.

Wildlife Habitat: The analysis area contains an excess of mid-seral habitat, with a corresponding deficit of early and late seral habitats. Road density is high across much of the area and wildlife security habitat is limited. The ability of the proposed project to promote a more balanced distribution of habitats and maintain or improve wildlife security will be evaluated.

Interdisciplinary Team and Time Line

An interdisciplinary team has been assigned to complete the environmental analysis. Rick Brazell, Clearwater Forest Supervisor, is the deciding official for this project. The current time line for this project is as follows:

Initiate Public Scoping – October 2010 (60-day comment period)
Draft EA out for 30-day Public Comment Period – November 2011
Decision – March 2012

Send Us Your Comments

Comments are invited on the Upper Basin project proposal. Comments are requested by January 7, 2011, and may be submitted in writing, orally, or through electronic means. Please address written comments to: Susan Shaw, District Ranger, Palouse Ranger District, 1700 Highway 6, Potlatch, Idaho 83855.

Oral comments may be provided during normal business hours via telephone (208-875-1131) or in person. Please ask for Susan Shaw.

Electronic comments may be submitted to comments-northern-clearwater-palouse@fs.fed.us. The subject line must contain the name of the project for which you are submiting comments (i.e. Upper Basin Project). Acceptable formats are MS Word, Word Perfect, or RTF.

Should you have questions or need further information, please contact George Harbaugh, Interdisciplinary Team Leader, at the Kamiah Ranger Station (208-935-4260). Thank you for your interest in this project.

Sincerely,

/s/ Wade E. Sims
WADE E. SIMS
Acting District Ranger